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Should students participate in curriculum design? Discussion arising from a first year curriculum design project and a literature review

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Summary

This paper outlines some of the findings from a QAA (Scotland) funded project exploring first year curriculum design (Bovill et al. 2008). Whilst many examples exist of curricula being designed in ways to engage first year students, there are fewer published examples of active student participation in curriculum design processes. In the current higher education context where student engagement in learning is emphasised (Carini et al, 2006), this paper asks more generally whether students should be actively participating in curriculum design.

In order to answer this question, several elements of the project findings are explored: student views gathered in focus groups; staff views collected in workshops; and the case studies where students were actively involved in curriculum design. The data are examined for lessons that inform the debate about whether students should be participating in curriculum design, in first year and at other levels. Alongside these findings, relevant literature is critiqued in order to ascertain the desirability and feasibility of adopting curriculum design approaches that offer opportunities for active student participation.

Introduction

In higher education there is currently an emphasis on students becoming more engaged in the learning process (Carini et al, 2006). Indeed, there are suggestions that students should become active co-creators of learning (SFC, 2008; SFC, 2006). This has led to some suggestions for greater student participation in designing specific elements of courses such as assessment (Nicol, 2008). There have also been a handful of specific calls for students to become active participants in the design of the curriculum.

Fraser and Bosanquet (2006) outline definitions of the curriculum given by academic staff with one definition describing the curriculum as “...a dynamic, emergent and collaborative process of learning for both student and teacher” (Fraser and Bosanquet, 2006:272). This expands the traditional idea of the curriculum towards a view of the “teacher and student acting as co-constructors of knowledge” (Fraser & Bosanquet, 2006:275). However, a recent research project examining first year curriculum design found few published examples of the curriculum being co-constructed in this way (Bovill et al, 2008).

In the following section the project findings that relate to active student participation (ASP) in curriculum design are outlined.

First year curriculum design project: what did the findings say?

From 2006-2008, the QAA Scotland funded nine projects as part of their first year enhancement theme. One of these projects focused on first year curriculum design. The first stage of the project was the completion of a literature review of first year curriculum design. Data were also gathered from staff workshops, student focus groups and from case studies that provided examples of first year curriculum design which were engaging students. These case studies were collected from throughout the higher education sector in the UK, with fewer examples submitted from Ireland and the USA.

Although this was by no means a comprehensive study, the data gathered from staff in workshops, students in focus groups and from the case studies all supported the view that students should be participating in curriculum design. Respondents reported that where students' own experiences become a focus for learning and a basis for curriculum design, students found learning to be more relevant and authentic. Others argued that where students are involved in curriculum design, the enhanced choice can lead to personalisation of their learning experience as well as increased responsibility over their own learning.

The most frequently mentioned mode of participation involved student feedback on courses. It is widespread practice in higher education for staff to use feedback to inform curricular modifications. Methods of gathering student feedback commonly included use of staff-student liaison committees, feedback questionnaires, focus groups and the use of electronic voting systems. However, despite many participants reporting that staff are reactive to student feedback and are incorporating changes to curricula on this basis, only three case studies were submitted where staff proactively introduced opportunities for students to participate in curriculum design (Bovill et al. 2008).

Different levels and models of participation by students were illustrated in these three case studies. For example, in one module at Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh, first year students brought their own experiences to class and the curriculum was constructed around this. The students also contributed to writing of curriculum materials. In a second case study at University College, Dublin, students were paid to design the virtual learning environment for a module they had just completed. Finally, at Elon University, North Carolina, students were paid to work in collaboration with staff to design a variety of courses (see Bovill et al 2008 for further details).

The issue is not straightforward, however; while students expressed a strong desire to be challenged in the learning process, staff who took part in workshops as part of this project had some concerns. They asked whether first year students are sufficiently experienced or appropriately prepared to be designing the curriculum. This led the project team to revisit the literature in an attempt to further address the broad question of whether students should be actively participating in curriculum design.

What does the literature on active student participation in curriculum design say?

Calls for student participation in the curriculum go back as far as Dewey (1916) at the beginning of the 20th Century. Others have concurred with Dewey's views that students

Should students participate in curriculum design?

should share responsibility for curriculum planning (Aronowitz, 1994, 1981; Shor, 1992; Pinar, 1981; Rogers and Freiberg, 1969). Within more recent mainstream higher education literature, there are a handful of specific calls for students to become active participants in the design of the curriculum. These include, for example, those teaching courses that have an explicit remit to promote active, responsible citizenship (Fisher, 2005; Scandrett et al, 2005; Grudens-Schuck, 2003; Wilkinson and Scandrett, 2003), and those involved in language teaching (Breen and Littlejohn, 2000a).

Within the literature, there is a range of rationales for students participating in curriculum design. More generally, active and participatory approaches are thought to enhance and support learning (Kahn and O'Rourke, 2005; Reynolds et al, 2004; Ivanic, 2000; Brown et al, 1989; Kolb, 1984). Some authors within higher education make greater claims and suggest that ASP changes students' lives and through this transformation they may become active and critical citizens who can change their communities (Crowther et al, 2005; Scandrett et al, 2005; Wilkinson and Scandrett, 2003).

In common with findings from the first year curriculum design project, in the literature, authors argue that ASP in curriculum design is essential to support learning through, for example: students engaging in authentic, relevant and meaningful learning; breaking down the power differential between staff and students; and students experiencing the freedom to become critical thinkers and critical beings in the world (Barnett and Coate, 2005; Rice, 2004; Freire 2003; Taylor et al, 2002; Mezirow, 2000; Rogers and Freiberg, 1969). ASP in curriculum design also enhances student choice, contributing to learners taking more responsibility for their own learning (Hooks, 1994; Rogers and Freiberg, 1969).

However, Reynolds et al (2004) caution that we do not know enough about what is meant by participation. They suggest that there is widespread use of the term participation, partly because it is often viewed as unquestionably positive. Despite the justifications for pursuing ASP outlined above, there are also a number of possible drawbacks to ASP in curriculum design outlined in the literature.

ASP can be threatening to students who have come through an education system where teachers have dominated the classroom and students may resist new approaches (Shor, 1992; Rogers and Freiberg 1969). Students may also be sceptical of participatory approaches if they have previous experience of tutors claiming to use participatory techniques in which they have been manipulated to create an impression of involvement for the tutor's benefit (Reynolds et al 2004).

Participatory approaches have also been criticised for reifying the views of the less powerful - in this case the students (Reynolds et al 2004; Cooke and Kothari, 2001). This often means that an uncritical value is placed on the views of students, whatever their views are. This is potentially flawed in the same way the traditional reification of the tutor's stance is flawed. So how do the results from the first year curriculum design project and the arguments within the literature help to answer the question posed?

Should students be actively participating in curriculum design?

Unfortunately, there is little systematic evaluation of the impact of ASP in curriculum design that helps to answer this question. There is a distinct need for further research in this area. Staff in workshops during the first year curriculum design project were concerned that students might not have enough, or might not have the right kind of, knowledge and skills to participate in curriculum design. Whilst these staff were referring specifically to first year students, this is a broader concern where staff may have years of experience of designing the curriculum and may believe students do not have the expertise to make decisions about curriculum planning that will have substantial impact on their learning. Some students may also feel overloaded with work and that curriculum design is the teacher's role (Bovill et al, 2008; Martyn, 2000; Slembrouck, 2000; Shor, 1992).

Yet, in other areas of academic life, for example, in relation to academic writing skills or student representation, we do not necessarily expect students to have all the skills they require at the beginning of a process. We offer preparation, training and guidance to students to support them in learning about the elements of academic life with which they must become familiar. Therefore, if we think students should be offered opportunities to participate in curriculum design, we may need offer preparation and guidance in the first instance.

Staff involved in curriculum design have varying degrees of expertise and experience. They also define the curriculum differently (Fraser and Bosanquet, 2006). Similarly, students are also likely to have varying experiences and definitions of the curriculum. Time may be required to negotiate shared understandings before setting out on actual design processes. Indeed, the level of negotiation needed may take longer than curriculum design processes that staff are used to:

“Time is absolutely essential in the empowerment process. We have found that it often takes time for students to develop the confidence - and the language - to express pedagogical ideas clearly. Many seem at first to doubt that we will take them seriously. In most course design projects, a moment comes when students suddenly realise that they are being heard. We have begun to structure our course design projects to include an early and public point...when students are making an important decision, such as selecting the textbook. This moment typically changes the dynamic of the design group, empowering students to be active participants and showing faculty the value of listening to students” (Felten in Bovill et al, 2008: 88).

This process obviously requires significant investment of time, energy and skills, but Michael Apple argues that “...there exists in curriculum development...something of a failure of nerve. We are willing to prepare students to assume only ‘some responsibility for their own learning’ (Apple 1981:115). Indeed, this leads to another key implication of student participation in curriculum design – that the tutor-student relationship is changed.

In co-designing the curriculum, there is a challenge to the predominant understanding of the student-tutor relationship where the tutor holds most of the power and students are subordinate. ASP implies a relationship where the tutor and students are learners co-creating the learning experience through dialogue. As Freire explains:

Should students participate in curriculum design?

“Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but who is himself [sic] taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach” (Freire 2003:63).

Similarly, Rogers and Freiberg (1969) argue that the teacher becomes a co-learner in this process. This view of a collaborative student-tutor relationship outlined here relies on collective inquiry and dialogue (Haggis 2006; Grudens-Schuck 2003). This dialogue between the tutor and students implies a new view of the learner as a knowledgeable and critical partner in learning (Darder et al, 2003; Freire 2003; Grudens-Schuck 2003; Shor 1992; Aronowitz 1981). However, it is important to note that ASP does not remove the teacher’s expertise and the key role they have in facilitating learning (Bartolome, 2003; Breen and Littlejohn, 2000b).

Although power is shared between staff and students in this model of a co-created curriculum, this approach is demanding of staff, as demonstrated in the previous quote from Peter Felten. The process of co-creation implies that staff will need to be more self-aware, highly flexible, knowledgeable and sensitive to respond to student learning needs and the direction in which the students want to take the curriculum. This negotiated curriculum design process would also be affected by any professional standard requirements, regulatory frameworks and personal views of how a subject should be taught. This context may constrain the level of student participation in the curriculum that is possible, but there may still be room for creative approaches where students’ ideas and previous experience are valued and utilised within the curriculum planning process.

For many tutors it may be uncomfortable to relinquish control over elements of the curriculum. Numerous authors acknowledge that changing power relations tends to be unpopular with the powerful as it implies a giving up of previous privileges (Gwatkin, 2000; Arnstein, 1969). Similarly in higher education, student-centred approaches and student control over elements of curriculum design are likely to face some resistance from those academics who gain privileges (e.g. status, power, money) from being defined as an expert teacher. On the other hand, Grudens-Schuck (2003) suggests that in courses that are teaching about participation and social justice, adopting ASP in curriculum design reduces cognitive dissonance for tutor and students.

The process of co-constructing the curriculum offers opportunities for greater clarity over the expectations of tutor and students about the aims of the curriculum and the potential impacts on learning. It is also likely that the experience of being involved in curriculum design will enhance students’ awareness of the learning process and how different elements of the curriculum impact on learning, such as: timetabling; setting learning outcomes; setting assessments; and choosing textbooks. Through this process the student gains greater control over their own learning. Another way of involving students in the curriculum design process is to enable their participation at a later stage and therefore capitalise on their experience of a course. In one case study from the first year curriculum design project, students who had completed a course at University College, Dublin were involved in its redesign (Bovill et al, 2008). The advantage here was that students had experienced the course and held useful views as to how the curriculum might be

Bovill et al.

redesigned. They also gained experience of curriculum design. The disadvantage in this case was that this design was retrospective and the process did not enable these students to work on the curriculum for a course which they were currently studying – their curriculum design impacted on other students who had no influence upon their own curriculum.

Having presented a mixed picture from the first year curriculum design project and the literature, what conclusions can we draw?

Conclusions

Questions might be raised as to whether the current higher education context is supportive of ASP in curriculum design. The implied shifts in power and control between tutor and student would require a university which encourages students to act critically and to challenge and question the world in which they live (Barnett, 1997; Haggis, 2006). Yet, many authors have raised concerns that universities are losing their criticality in the face of the recent surge of managerialism and instrumentalism in the UK higher education sector. They suggest that this vision of a critical higher education may be under threat (Barnett and Coate, 2005; Rice, 2004; Taylor et al, 2002; Barnett, 1997).

On the basis of previous discussion, we should not assume that ASP is always positive or appropriate. Indeed there is a need for further evaluation and research into the impacts of ASP in curriculum design. There is also a need to examine the feasibility and desirability of ASP in curriculum design in different contexts and to investigate the factors which influence the nature of ASP in curriculum design within these contexts.

Nevertheless, if our current goals in higher education include enhancing student engagement in learning, and if students have a desire to be challenged in the learning process, then ASP in curriculum design may be an area which we need to explore further.

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